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ABSTRACT

Examination of an average student's and an honors student's essay revisions showed that while both students rewrote toward meaning, the honors student was more aware of the reasons for her revisions. Gradually, through several versions of her paper, the average student discovered her focus and could then complete her introductory paragraph. This process of writing, reappraising and rewriting indicates the mutual dependence of meaning and form. Though able to make meaningful connections between her experiences and her ideas, however, this student's essay never approached the quality of the honors student's. Rather than increased stylistic control, the honors student's more successful revisions may be due to a greater ability to reflect on her own thinking. While the average student could give only vague reasons for her revisions, the honors student offered clear and frequently sophisticated explanations for her changes. She chose words, for example, not simply to convey ideas, but also to elicit specific responses from the reader. While findings based on such limited samples cannot be considered broadly applicable, the case study method remains valid, offering a precise and immediate picture of the student's struggle to develop meaning through revision. (MM)

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Does Seeing What I Say Help Me Know What I Think?: Four Students Revising

I

I feel obliged to begin my talk with a cautionary note, and it is this: once one begins to study "revision," it becomes as much a metaphysical as a compositional concept. It becomes, in fact, a way of life. That can lead to problems. You see, "revision" can simply mean "changing one's mind"--a pleasantly ambiguous phrase denoting anything from altering one's cognitive structure to deciding to do something other than what one had originally intended.

Now there is plenty to be said in favor of changing one's mind. However, when it becomes a habit, one becomes what is known as "chronically unreliable." And to make matters worse, once one elevates revision to a metaphysical principle, one's unreliability, too, comes to be based on principle. Such insidious logic began to affect my thought and action some time back, but I laughed it off at first and sought refuge in a new definition of revision: Revision, I would say, is license to commit unlimited confusion.

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But vices, you know, have a way of growing, and I confess that the vice of revision has assumed considerably larger dimensions than I had foreseen it would. For example, I submitted for this session a talk with the title appearing at the top of this paper, and I told the conveners of this conference that I would discuss four students revising. However, I have changed my mind: I have revised my thinking. I am not going to discuss four students revising, nor three students either. I am going to discuss only two students revising, and really the second of those two I use primarily as a shining foil for the first.

So, I apologize: I have revised my talk, and therefore also my title. My presentation should now be sub-titled "Two Students Revising." But I believe that everyone will benefit from this revision, for, while revision can be defined as license to commit unlimited confusion, it can also be described as a means toward knowledge and order. You see, I have also already revised my revised definition of revision. But so much for cautionary notes.

II

In my talk, I address two matters: 1) how one student revised her way toward her meaning, and 2) how different students explain their reasons for revising as they do. This dual focus sheds light on two matters: 1) on the extent to which, as Bill Coles recently said, even struggling writers "make

connections" by means of the composing process[1]; and 2) why persistent revision might not inevitably lead to good writing.

Before addressing those matters, however, I want to describe my research design--to give it a grander name than it really deserves: I studied the writing of four freshman writers, two of them average writers and two of them honors students. I collected all of the writing that went into the composing of each of three essays, and held retrospective interviews of one to two hours with each writer after he or she had submitted each essay. The design, simple though it is, did enable me to answer the question I posed, which, in its clearest form, is, "Does Seeing What I Say Help Me Know What I Think?" To tip you off at the outset, I should tell you that the answer is "Yes," but the "yes" has a rather fascinating form.

I wish to look first at the writing of an average student, a young woman named Kathy. I will look at only one paper, written in response to a fairly complex assignment in which students were asked to offer advice to a group facing a difficult problem. Kathy chose to write about a summer job program, named DARCOM, run by the federal government. She had heard that the program might be a victim of the budget-cutting axe, and decided to advise a group of college students on how to salvage what they could of this very helpful program. The essay went through six drafts and provides moving documentation of how a writer might write her way through to her meaning. However, I want to look at only two sections, her creation of an introductory paragraph and the development of one particular detail within the essay.

Kathy had a great deal of trouble beginning her essay: she initially wrote six different introductions, all of which were eventually discarded. The introduction that she ultimately used was written only after she had completed the third of her six drafts. By looking at parts of those three drafts, we can see where that introduction came from.

We can begin with a look at the final paragraph of Kathy's first draft, in which she wrote:

> I have explained 1 reason for the worth of the program as being somewhat abstract. The more concrete reason for keeping the program is because the government needs help. The excess paperwork and the little jobs have to be done by someone when the government employees take a vacation who will continue their job? If there is a summer hire there, it would keep the work down for others and it would be more efficient.

This paragraph focuses on the benefits which the summer hire provides the federal government. However, early in her third draft, Kathy wrote:

> Those who seem to benefit most from this program are the college students. Since they need the job for only a short time, what could be a better type of

job. This work can benefit a person in so many ways.

In this paragraph, the focus is on the benefits the program provides to the students rather than on those it provides to the federal government. Later in that same draft she wrote the following paragraph, and I have underlined the sentence in which we find, for the first time, the connection that will eventually provide the central intention for her essay:

> The government doesn't feel they should continue this program. Where will all this paperwork go to and who will complete it? Those summer hires are a great asset and should be noted as to the jobs they accomplish. Even though many tasks are tedious and seem unimportant, they serve a specific purpose in the end. This program should not be stopped at all. <u>It is the ideal work for a college student and an ideal work for the government</u>. Many people take a vacation during the summer months. The summer hire can serve as a temporary replacement and is also able to move around the agency. This program has been a great success in past years.

Here, the connection is made: the paragraph now articulates the dual focus on the mutual benefits afforded both students <u>and</u>

federal government. All of this work resulted in an introduction which gave a clear focus not only to Kathy's first paragraph, but to subsequent drafts of the entire paper. Her final introduction reads:

> The government has been known for overspending on useless projects. This problem relates to the summer program at DARCOM. This program is not useless in the eyes of the college student, who needs a job temporarily, or in the eyes of the department needing their help.

As you can see, this is not memorable writing; that is not the point, however. The point is that Kathy, as she said herself, was not sure how to begin the paper. "I don't even know how to begin it," she said. "If I can't begin it, how am I gonna write it?" Well, fortunately she decided simply to write a draft to find out what she had to say, and found herself with several basic ideas which, as she revised, provided the guiding purpose of her paper. She had, in effect, written her way to her primary meaning.

But what does this tell us other than what we have all known forever: that the introduction is almost never the first thing a writer writes. Well, writing as a form of discovery applies equally to every stage of the writing process and to each part of a written work. To demonstrate that I ask you to look briefly at

the slow evolution of one idea in Kathy's paper, the theme of "Experience Gained." In her second draft, she wrote the following paragraph, an initial attempt to discuss the subject:

> Besides the abstract reasons the government program should continue, there is the obvious concrete reason. Experience is acquired through this work. Typing skills can improve very quickly when every other word is a mistake when the job starts.

Kathy was evidently impressed by the opportunites which this theme provided, for as she built her third draft upon her second, she began to develop it:

> Experience is gained through this job. Typing skills improve very quickly if every other word is an error. It gets so frustrating to be typing an important letter and using a whole stack of paper. In the long run it helps a person to become better. Along with typing, skills such as filing, running errands, and xeroxing are part of the job. There is an abundance of paperwork to be completed and tedious jobs to be done. The summer hire, being a novice to the job, can catch on quickly with these small jobs. The worker also does little things for

> the office such as water the plants, make coffee, and clean the office which the permanent workers tend to neglect. This job can give experience to someone who has never worked in an office.

In subsequent drafts, each of these themes--typing, filing, xeroxing, etc.--is developed in further detail. Grammatical errors and stylistic infelicities abound, but the substance of the paper has improved dramatically through the revisions. The following paragraph, on the subject of "xeroxing," is representative.

> A second task of a temporary is to xerox correspondence. The xerox room becomes a permanent sight for a summer worker. On the first day of my job, the office in which I worked gave me a stack of papers and asked for ten separated, stapled copies. This was supposed to occupy me until they could find something else for me to do, but also to see if I could handle the easy "stuff" before taking on the important tasks. There is not much a person can do wrong in xeroxing materiel, so it seems like a tedious assignment, however it is a necessary one. Several copies of a correspondence need to be put on file and several need to go out to inform other departments about the transaction. Papers which are

> stamped as CONFIDENTIAL or SECRET require a special xerox machine to reproduce them. Without these machines, the government would not be able to function steadily. The summer worker helps a great deal with this task of reproducing important materiel.

In writing this paper, Kathy was meeting the demands of a rather practical writing assignment: students were asked to give advice to a group having a particular problem. Despite the practicality of the assignment, however, we can see clear evidence of what Ann Berthoff calls "the active mind" which is nothing more nor less than imagination, which in turn, as Berthoff makes clear, is what Coleridge meant when he referred to "The living power and prime agent of all human perception."[2] Notice what that means: that the creation of an introductory paragraph and the development of one major idea in the paper of an average writer reflects "the living power and prime agent of all human perception." Now, when Coleridge formulated that definition of the imagination, he did not expect to find it expressed in the writing of students, apprentices, struggling amateurs. Neither do we when we first study aesthetics. However, the joke is on us, for in fact the imagination--the prime agent of human perception, the ability to make meaningful connections in our experience and reasoning, the ability both to make meaningful form and to select and refine its details in

order to provide still more meaning--all of that is found, too, in the slow blooming of an idea literally taking shape. Taking shape, I might add, only because it is being given shape by a mind which may intuit the shape of its idea but which can make that shape clear to others and to herself only through the process of writing and rewriting--through revision. Again, I quote from Berthoff, who writes:

> From craftsmen we can learn something about the relationship of pattern and design to forming; from artists we can learn even more fundamental truths about forming--that you don't begin at the beginning, that intention and structure are dialectically related, that the search for limits is itself heuristic, that form emerges from chaos, that you say in order to understand, and so on.[3]

III

But wait. In reference to the germination, gestation, maturation, and final expression of these ideas I have called up the words of Coleridge and I have very nearly classified the writer as "an artist" simply by setting her essay within the context of Berthoff's words. Yet, if we look at the two paragraphs that resulted from all of this imaginative and persistent intellectual effort, we find a prose best described as

unmemorable. As I continued to find in paragraph after paragraph solid evidence of creative imagination in the writing of all four of my subjects, yet clearly a better finished product in the writing of the honors students, I began to ask myself a second question: "If students in both the average and honors classes work so hard on their writing and revise so persistently, why does the quality of the writing differ so?" I struggled through several answers to that question, some answers dealing with the linguistic level at which writers concentrated, some dealing with the rhetorical concerns students expressed. However, I have come finally to the conclusion that one major reason for the difference in the quality of the written product is the different extent to which the two groups of students can explain their reasons for revising--which in turn suggests how well they understood their own writing and thinking.

Evidence for that I find in the interviews conducted after the writing of the essays. Basically, the average students were inconsistent in their answers to questions about why they revised as they did. Occasionally, they would explain quite precisely the reasons for a revision, but at least equally often their answers were vague: they would say, "it sounds better," or "it flows," or "it sounds more like me." Also, their comments were accompanied remarkably often by such qualifiers as "I guess," "I suppose," or "possibly I wanted." And one of the two writers, in explaining quite an effective, small change, said that it "sounded better," and when I asked him why, he said: "Somewhere

in my mind it just says it's better. Maybe it's grammatical. I don't know." And, on one occasion, the same writer, explaining a revision on which I congratulated him, struggled to explain what exactly had motivated it. Finally, he explained it as "sixth sense maybe."

On the other hand, the answers offered by the honors students were seldom vague. To demonstrate this, I want to look at the revision of just one sentence and the "rationale of its creation" offered by the writer, an honors student named Andi. Her explanations, often amazingly specific, show, I think, the precision with which she can reflect on her own thinking, and I have begun to think of that quality--the ability to think about one's own thinking and to articulate with precision one's thoughts about one's thoughts--as the unique domain of the advanced writer.

Take, for example, the topic of connotation. Connotation is a subcategory of precision: when one searches out precise wording, the mot juste so to speak, one searches for the word with the best blend of denotative and connotative meaning, and we can see Andi doing that frequently. In fact, by the time our fifth interview rolled around, I was asking Andi more and more difficult questions about what she was thinking about as she wrote and what she meant when she cited "connotation" as her reason to revise a word or phrase. In describing what she meant by "connotation," she said:

> What effect does this word or this sentence or this phrase have on me? And will it have on my reader? OK. I'll read it, and I'll say, "What response do I get from this?" I get response A. But I don't want response A. I want response B. Change this word. OK. And now do I get response B? Well, kind of. All right, let's reorder it and place the emphasis somewhere else. Well, that's a little bit better. Let's stick a semicolon in. Aha, there's the response I'm looking for right there

Notice the sophistication of this process: she is not asking "What idea do I want to get across?" or "How can I come up with enough words to fulfill the assignment?" She is asking herself how she can elicit from her reader the response she wishes. We can see this control at work in the revision of one sentence in particular. In her paper describing the rigors and beauty of ballet, she described in the following words the effect that the successful dancer has upon her audience:

> With the next bar of music, she runs across the stage and leaps. For an instant she is suspended in mid air, as if held there by invisible strings.

This pair of sentences did not satisfy here, however, so she revised them to read:

> With the next bar of music, she bounds across the stage and leaps, suspended, as if by invisible strings, for an instant in mid air.

When I asked her why she had revised this sentence as she had, she gave two explanations: first, she wanted to improve the accuracy of the sentence, and second, she liked the way that the sentence, as structured in the revision, "suspends the reader in mid-air, too," a quality which had so struck me when I read the revised paper. Again, sophisticated commentary accompanies sophisticated intention.

I return to my first two questions: "Does Seeing What I Say Help Me Know What I Think?" Yes. "Language is itself," writes Ann Berthoff, "the great heuristic."[4] But then, if the answer to that question is "yes," and if students do revise their way arduously toward their meaning, why do the results differ so in quality from the average group to the advanced group? I have two tentative answers to suggest, the second being to my mind the more interesting. The first is that the regular students revise their way toward a better understanding of their content, but as yet cannot revise, too, so that their style shimmers as the style of the advanced students often does. So much of their intellectual energy is invested in discovering and creating their meaning that they have too little, either energy or time, left over to ascend the ladder of style. My second answer relies again on the writing of Ann Berthoff, who says that one of our

goals, as teachers, is to provide students not only with the opportunities to think, but also with the opportunities to "think about thinking." Quite simply, the students in the honors classes might be more advanced writers because they are more advanced in their ability to think about thinking, to reflect on the workings of their own engaged minds.

IV

And now I would like to end by posing and addressing a third question, this one related to the method of my little inquiry. I studied the writing of only four students, and here I have addressed a small part of the information provided by two of those four writers. In reading the work of these two students, and in hearing their explanations of their revisions, you might have recognized your own students; however, my two students, providing as they do such a small sample, might have nothing in common with yours at all. If my four students have nothing in common with your students, then we might question the usefulness of the case study method. In response to such a question, I would quote Elting Morison, who described the value of art in a way similar to the way in which I would describe the value of case studies. He wrote:

> First, to make its points, art works at the development of the particular case. In so doing, it

> loses something to the rational authority that can logically demonstrate, from stable evidence produced by repeating experiments, the force of a general proposition. But where the realization of the case is sufficiently complete, it can indicate, by implication, the presence of a more general truth. And in its concentration on the single instance, art can demonstrate the power of the particular: the fact that, while the terms of life may be set by statistical probabilities, experience for the individual is made up of a series of discrete and real occasions. It thus vividly preserves the sense of the immediate and specific, the steadying concreteness of actuality that gets muffled up and insulated in the generality that is an abstraction.[5]

This is true, too, of the case study method, whether the subject is Tom Jones, Humbert Humbert, or our students. The case study method might not <u>prove</u> anything; however, it implies a great deal, and implication opens doors, generates thought, challenges complacency--as does art. But I am compelled to take this at least one step further: case study does lead to insight, too, for it taught me that--despite the often uneloquent statement of a final draft--students are struggling to make meaning as they write, growing through revision, reconsideration, frustration. A teacher's learning at least that much is sufficient pay-off for the case study method.

Notes

[1] William Coles, talk delivered at Virginia Tech as part of the Visiting Scholars Program, February 10, 1983.

[2] Ann Berthoff, The Making of Meaning, (Montclair, N.J.: Boynton Cook Publishers, 1981), p. 28.

[3] Berthoff, pp. 103-104.

[4] Berthoff, p. 38.

[5] Eiting Morison, "The Uncertain Relation," Daedalus, 109, No.1 (1980), 182.